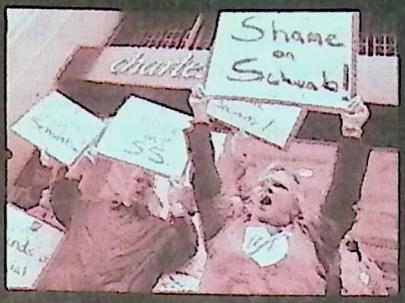

Labor can't win in a house divided

By Scott Marshall

Scott Marshall grew up in Alabama and Virginia where he first became active in the civil rights movement in high school in the mid 1960's. He worked on voter registration and anti-Klan projects in rural Southern Virginia and Tennessee. He was also active against the war in Vietnam.

Scott has been a life long trade unionist and was active in rank and file reform movements in the Teamsters, Machinists and Steelworkers unions in the 1970's and '80's. He was co-chair of the Save Our Jobs committee of USWA local 1834 at Pullman Standard in Chicago and active in nationwide organizing against plant closings and layoffs. He was a founder of the unemployed organization Jobs or Income Now (JOIN), in Chicago, and the National Congress of Unemployed Organizations in the 1980's.

Scott has worked for the Communist Party since 1987 when he became the district organizer for the party in Illinois. Scott is currently a vice chair of the Communist Party, USA and chair of its national labor commission. Besides his focus on labor and anti-globalization issues, his responsibilities have taken him to South Africa, China, Russia, Greece, Canada, Mexico and Brazil for labor and party related conferences and meetings. Scott is also active in the Steelworkers Organization of Active Retirees (SOAR).

Published by Communist Party Labor Commission

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Cover and design by Marguerite Wright

Like no other time in the last 50 years, a united labor movement is critical to defending the working class and the American people. It is decisive to any hope for a progressive agenda for the whole nation, not just for union members.

Bush and company know only too well that labor, along with the African American and Latino communities and the women's movement, are the core power behind the massive coalition that came so close to defeating them in 2004. Now Bush and his ultra-right-wing Republican cronies in Congress are daily ratcheting up their efforts to dismantle progressive social legislation. Unions and the AFL-CIO are under particular assault for their role in the 2004 elections. Labor is critical in the fight to hold off the Bush administration's attacks on the people.

This is a time of intense class struggle on all fronts: economic, political and social. Capitalist globalization is dramatically eating away at the manufacturing base of this country, driving down wages and the living standards of all working families. The Bush administration's lies and maneuvers in Iraq are killing and wounding thousands of working-class kids in a terrible war. Civil rights and civil liberties are being dramatically eroded by all branches of government in the name of "homeland security." George Bush maintains an enemy hit list. It features IRS attacks on the NAACP and "investigations" of other civil rights and women's organizations. Meanwhile labor is subjected to whole new rounds of government red tape and scrutiny.

Deepening attacks on labor and public workers

Bush's second term has unleashed a dramatically escalated attack on the unions themselves.

On Jan. 27, the Bureau of Labor Statistics released the figures on union density, or the percentages of union membership in different sectors of the economy, for 2004. Despite the corporate and Bush administration all-out assault on unions during his first term, the report showed only a slight decline in union density. The public sector remains the most highly organized with 36 percent overall and 41 percent among local government workers.

On that same day, the Bush administration began to implement sweeping changes to the civil service protections for workers at the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security. The new rules do away with union rights for several hundred thousand workers. The new system guts grievance procedures. It introduces a "merit" system placing raises and promotions at the whim of the immediate supervisor. Now pay and promotions will no longer be based on negotiated increases and seniority.

Emboldened by Bush's re-election, on Jan. 27 the

administration announced that they would be introducing legislation for a complete overhaul of what they called the "outdated" federal civil service system along the lines introduced by the DOD and Homeland Security. In addition Bush has targeted 850,000 federal workers' jobs for privatization.

This attack on union rights in the most heavily organized sector of the economy is not accidental. It is a central part of the ultra-right's union-busting program. In January, the newly elected Republican governors of Indiana and Missouri, within hours of being sworn in, used executive orders to terminate union rights and collective bargaining agreements for thousands of state workers. And in California, Schwarzenegger has stepped up his attacks on public workers by going after teachers' and state employees' benefits, including pension plans.

The Bush 2006 Federal Budget proposal deepens the attack on public workers. It calls for a 17 percent increase in funding for the Labor Department's Office of Labor Management Standards that oversees so-called "union accountability." Further, the Bush budget proposes drastic cuts in many domestic programs and in money to the states. These cuts not only force layoffs in federal programs, but also squeeze state and local budgets, forcing even more layoffs.

The debates in labor

At the same time, a vigorous debate and discussion is taking place in the labor movement about direction. In the last couple of years talk has developed and expanded around a broad array of topics including problems and ideas for change. At the urging of the AFL-CIO leadership, many national unions and central labor councils have issued plans and open letters with specific proposals for change. The intensity of the debate has been spurred on by a group of unions which formed, then disbanded, a loose caucus called the New Unity Partnership (NUP). It included UNITE and HERE (now merged), the Carpenters, the Laborers and SEIU.

Most on all sides of the debate acknowledged the important role that the NUP group played in getting the debate going. And in disbanding NUP, leaders said that they had accomplished their goal of getting a wide-ranging debate going. They said that they didn't want NUP to become the issue.

But great tensions still remain, in large part because SEIU leaders have threatened to withdraw from the AFL-CIO if their reform goals are not sufficiently achieved at the national convention this July in Chicago.

Leaving the AFL-CIO won't solve anything

There are those who like to compare the situation in labor today to that when the CIO split from the AFL. Some, while praising the CIO of the 1930s, still disparage its "class struggle trade unionism." Yet that brand of unionism resulted in massive coalitions of unemployed and unorganized workers, united with shop floor organizing committees and fighting on all fronts for the needs of working families. That labor movement was able to force the passage of the Wagner Act and other measures friendly to organizing. These movements also faced a Congress and government that could be moved by mass action to support workers' efforts. President Roosevelt declared publicly, "If I were a worker I would join a union."

If anything, the capitalism of today is more aggressive, more exploitive and more ruthless than the 1930s. The situation today facing labor is much more like what labor faced

with the beginnings of the Cold War in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Coming out of World War II, labor's prestige was high. The CIO was united behind a broad progressive social program for all workers, including national health care, civil rights, jobs, shorter hours, low cost housing, expanding Social Security, expanding educational opportunity for working people and much more. The CIO was poised to launch a major program to organize the South.

In the guise of "fighting communism," the government, with the full support of big business, launched a ferocious attack on labor that stopped progress in its tracks. Labor law was gutted, civil liberties were trampled on, and the labor movement was fragmented with splits, expulsions, raids and bitter inner-union rivalries. Just when labor needed its fighters the most, external and internal pressures drove out thousands of its best, most experienced and committed leaders.

The corporate/Bush attack on labor today is even more ferocious. And there is no doubt that labor's standing with the American people is on the upswing. Almost all unions, on all sides of this debate, played an outstanding role in the 2004 elections. And the AFL-CIO's lead in fighting the Bush and Wall Street plans to privatize Social Security is raising its prestige even more among vast sections of the people.

If a sizable chunk of the labor movement splits off from the AFL-CIO (and, make no mistake, 1.8 million members is a sizable chunk), how will that affect labor in this situation? Judging by the fragmentation of labor that resulted from the Cold War, it won't be good. Ridding the labor movement of the left and expelling a sizable chunk of the membership from the CIO arguably set labor back for several decades. It fueled the rise of "business unionism" and all kinds of "class partnership" ideas. Those ideas greatly contributed to the decline of labor's strength and bargaining power.

'Competition'?

Of course all historical comparisons weaken at some point. If SEIU leaves the AFL-CIO the effect will not be to remove the left from labor. Those who want to strengthen labor, those who want to see labor better able to take on big business and win for working families are in every union, in every sector, at all levels. The labor militants, who put the needs of workers before the profits of the multinational corporations and banks, are found everywhere in labor. Union fighters who believe that union solidarity and international labor solidarity are critical are everywhere. Labor activists who see unity and equality as core values are throughout labor.

No one can deny the tremendous organizing success and energy that SEIU has brought into the labor movement in the last few years. What good does it do to take that experience and drive outside of the house of labor? Labor history is full of examples showing that withdrawing from the main body of labor to "do it better" has most often failed.

Some even argue that "competition" between labor centers or federations would be good for union members. The theory seems to be that members could shop around for a better deal with a "better" union. Others seem to argue that competition will make unions work harder for their members.

But unions were formed in the first place to end competition between workers. Workers join together so the companies can't play one against the other by making them compete with each other as to who will work for less. In some industries companies whipsaw local

unions against each other to compete over who will work the cheapest to get the work or keep their plant open.

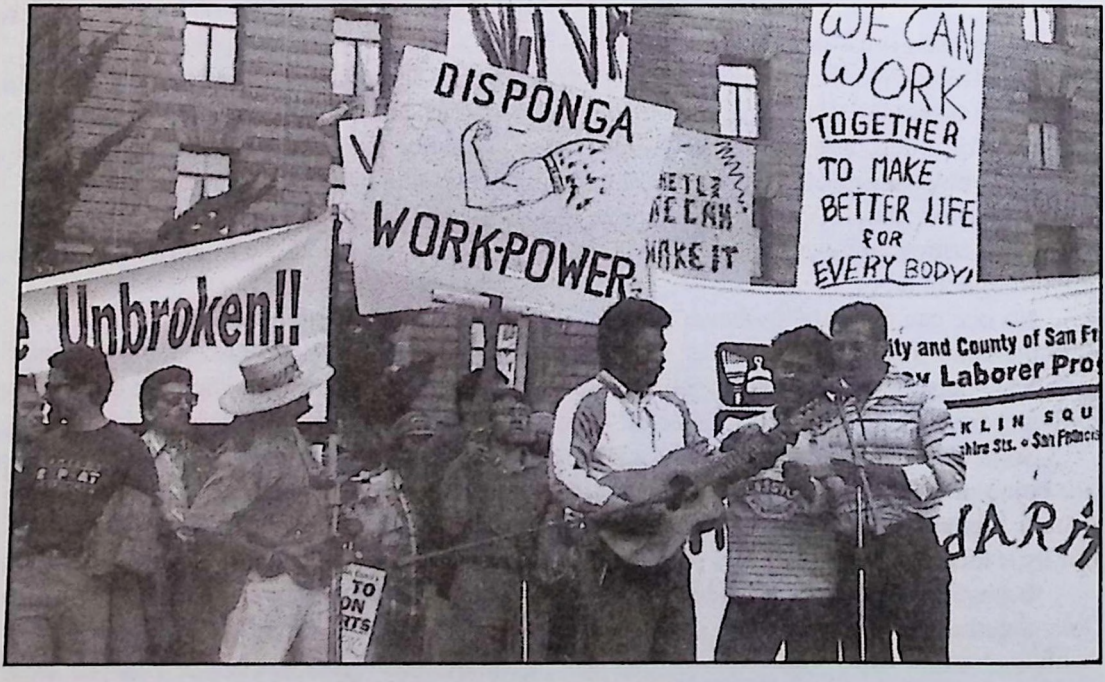
The AFL-CIO is the only mechanism that unions have to try and work out jurisdictional disputes and disagreements. Imperfect though the mechanism might be, it is the only real way labor has to control destructive and wasteful competition between unions. Competing labor centers would mean a divisive and inefficient free-for-all.

Capitalist globalization ought to drive home to us all that competition between workers only enriches the giant transnational corporations at the expense of millions of workers and their families. What the AFL-CIO has described as the race to the bottom is exactly the result of competition between workers.

Leaving also greatly undermines the very legitimate argument that labor needs to consolidate its power and leverage in industries and key sectors of the economy. Splitting the AFL-CIO would only guarantee that multiple unions will continue to exist in many sectors of the economy, giving the employers and big business more ways to pit worker against worker.

Unity and change are both needed

Some important thinking has come out of this debate in labor so far. There is a growing feeling that real change is possible and is underway. Perhaps the most important change is to "put the movement" back in labor. Unions will grow as more and more workers, organized and unorganized, see labor as a social movement and force for change. This is what makes labor's lead in the fight to save Social Security so important. It builds on the momentum and mass public awareness that labor built in trying to defeat Bush and the far-right Republicans in Congress. This is also the beauty of the campaign against Wal-Mart, the campaign for Rights@Work, and the campaign for national health



care. All build labor as a champion of all workers — organized and unorganized.

Everyone on all sides of the issues agree on these points. Wouldn't it be much better to continue to debate while uniting in action to win some of these critical fights for all of the working class?

For any union, or any group of unions, to leave the AFL-CIO at this moment would be a setback for all workers. But it would not stop the objective social pressures that are driving all of labor towards greater unity. Capitalist globalization, the viciousness of capital's drive for maximum profit at home and abroad, and the rise of the far right all compel labor toward unity and fightback. Class struggle is not a choice for the working class, it is a necessity. Unity is the only weapon labor has to counter the awesome power and wealth of capital. In the words of "Solidarity Forever":

"We can break their haughty power,
Gain our freedom when we learn
That the Union makes us strong!"

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